

Robin's Song

by Dannell Lites

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Summary: Nightwing remembers when he discovered some hard truths about his guardian and partner The Batman

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SPIFFY DISCLAIMER THINGIE!!

Ah don't own them (more's the pity!). DC comics does. Ah am only borrowing them and Ah promise to return them intact when Ah am done! If'n ya'll sue moi, Bruce is gonna be right *peeved*:::)

Thank again to my fellow Texas expatriate Syl for invaluable beta reading and advice!

Robin's Song

Bruce is odd.

Clark says that Bruce is one of the only people he knows who frighten him. Coming from Superman who counts among his enemies people like Lex Luthor and Brainiac that's pretty impressive. But, then, Clark is really just a Kansas farmboy at heart. He may have been conceived on Krypton, but he was raised in Smallville, Kansas by two of the nicest people you'd ever want to meet. The Kents are amazing. Bruce ...

Bruce doesn't come from Smallville.

One of the many, many amazing things about Bruce is that memory of his. He's never had it tested, of course, for obvious reasons. But I'd be willing to bet you that it's eidetic *and* photographic. Among other things. For example, he still remembers absolutely everything about the night his parents died. I guess it isn't easy to forget the night your world fell apart and everything stopped making sense. But twenty five years later he's still trying to beat it into submission; still trying to force it to make sense. Bruce can describe the musky scent of the perfume his mom was wearing, the slow graceful arc of

each falling pearl from her necklace when Joe Chill tore it from around her neck. The sound of the gun shot that killed his father is indelibly embedded in his memory, like gunpowder beneath the skin.

I can barely remember my real parents, anymore. I was only eight when they died. Almost as young as Bruce. I remember my father's hands best of all. Big strong hands that could pluck you safely from mid air and set you back down on the platform as lightly as a feather. That and his smile. He was always smiling. But the one thing I remember best about that hideous night is Bruce's voice.

"It's going to be all right, son," he told me. "I promise."

I'd been shuffled off into some forgotten corner while the grownups got on with life. The Police had already removed my parents bodies. Pop Haley was talking to a grim middle aged cop named Gordon. People were milling about restlessly but no one seemed to have time for me. I have never been more alone before or since in my life. Everyone seemed to have forgotten me.

Well, almost everyone ...

Bruce knelt down beside me there in the sawdust of the big top. I remember thinking that he was going to ruin that Saville Row suit of his. The muscles of his jaw were working silently and the tendons of his neck stood out like cords. But there was no sign of all that anger and passion anywhere in his voice. I remember looking up at him. And up and up and up ... Christ, he was tall. It still amazes me that I'm almost as tall as he is now. But not quite. No one is ever quite as tall as Bruce.

"I tried to warn them," I stammered. "I tried! But no one would listen! No one would listen!" I think that was when I started to cry. My small fists began pounding a steady tattoo on that massive chest. But, my strongest blows bounced off the muscles of his hard body like raindrops. I threw my arms around his neck and buried my face in the safety of his embrace, sobbing like the broken hearted little boy that I was. He didn't say a word. For a moment he stiffened, taken by surprise. And then, like rusty hinges, his arms went around my small form and gathered me in haltingly, hesitantly, as if they hadn't touched someone in a very long time and might have forgotten how.

Alfred Pennyworth is probably the Eighth Wonder Of The World. In those first days with Bruce Alfred is the one I remember. I think ...

I think that if it weren't for Alfred, I might have ended up as ... odd ... as Bruce. That wonderful English voice and those ever busy hands with all their late night freshly baked chocolate chip cookies and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches saved my sanity, I think. Alfred always had time for "Master Dick". Bruce wasn't easy to talk to back then. Barbara says it's like talking to a stone wall, sometimes. She's right about that.

"Rule Number One" he told me as he tossed me over his shoulder on to the practice mat the day he agreed to let me work with him. "You give me one hundred percent." Groggily, I picked myself up, gritted my teeth and came at him again from another angle.

"Rule Number Two:" he said calmly when he caught my ankle as I tried one of my more acrobatic maneuvers. "And then you give me more." I meant to end up behind him and surprise him. It didn't work. I hit the mat again, breathing hard, and in pain. Bruce loomed over me like a storm cloud.

"Rule Number Three: *I* make the rules."

Watch out for that last one, kid, I once told my successor, Tim Drake. It's a killer. He did pretty much the same routine with Tim. Bruce is a creature of habit.

Bruce has always taken a lot of heat because of me. Oh sure, Wally was Barry's sidekick from Day One and Donna was always fighting along side Diana. But they had superpowers. Me? Not a superpower to my name. Just like Bruce the only thing I have going for me is my training and my will. See? Nothin' up my sleeve ... Just like Bruce. Early on, I heard Bruce and Clark arguing about me.

"Taking an unpowered little boy into situations where he could easily be killed!" Clark cried. "Have you lost your mind completely, Bruce?"

That usually well modulated baritone is one of the most reassuring voices you can imagine. Heh. You don't have to imagine it, I guess. Just tune into WGBS Nightline News from Metropolis and you'll see what I mean. Whether he's reporting the news as Clark Kent or, as Superman, urging people not to panic that it's just another routine alien invasion that he'll have taken care of quicker than you can say, "Up, up and away!" that voice is always calm and soothing. I don't think I'd ever before heard it raised in anger. When Superman yells at you, you *know* you've been yelled at.

Bruce, of course, was utterly unimpressed.

"Not the last time I checked," he said crisply and left the room with Clark goggling at his back. As usual, it was Alfred who came to my rescue.

"Master Superman?"

It's amazing. Alfred pretty much knows everybody in the superhero community by their first names. But whenever they were in costume or being particularly dense it was always, "Master Flash" or "Master Green Lantern". Or even, "Master Superman".

"I'm afraid you don't quite understand, Sir," began Alfred quietly. I saw Clark frown.

"Master Dick is necessary," Alfred explained simply. "Without him and that bright, silly costume, without him and his atrocious puns, his smiles and his enthusiasm, Master Bruce would be lost. Without someone to directly protect and guide, Master Bruce might be worse than the criminals he wages such ruthless war against ... and, well, that isn't a very pleasant thought is it, Sir?" I wasn't close enough to see if Clark shuddered. But, I know *I* did.

"And without Master Bruce, young Master Dick might have turned out a great deal like Master Bruce himself. And, well, I hardly think

there's room for *two* of him is there? No, Master Bruce will see to it that the lad is safe and that he doesn't spend his life as he himself did in fruitless anger and frustration." Clark sighed.

"You'll look after them?" he said with a rueful shake of his head.

"Indeed, Sir," said Alfred, politely.

And that was an end of the matter. Clark never mentioned it again. Unfortunately, it took me almost a week of cajoling, hard work and practice before Bruce would let me rejoin him on his nightly patrols, so I was really pissed at Clark. Yes, Bruce *does* listen. But like everything else, he just does it in his own way.

Superheroes talk just like regular people. For the most part we *are* regular people. Donna assures me that she and Dinah and Babs have had some great girl talks about who has the best butt in herodome. I have it on good authority from Donna that that particular honor probably goes to Wally. All that running, I guess. But one subject that's pretty common to most JLA off duty chats is the Big Knock Down Dragout Fight Question. I've indulged in that one sometimes myself. You know, the one where everybody reveals their idea of who would be the last hero standing in a JLA free for all. Silly kid stuff, really. But I've kept notes. Over seventy-five percent of the people I've talked to put their money on Bruce. So would I. Don't *ever* count Bruce out. He's always prepared. Facing down Superman, he'll come up with some tiny fragment of kryptonite from out of that bottomless utility belt and WHAM! That's all she wrote. The trouble is, people are rarely prepared for him. *Me* least of all. Let me explain.

Back when Raven first showed up something strange happened. We Titans had teleported onto the JLA satellite. Caught them completely by surprise. Raven hadn't been able to convince them to help and they were in the way of something important. I had everything planned perfectly. I knew just who should take on who and just how they should do it. It went down beautifully. We had them down for the count and reeling, a real TKO. Until it happened. I took out Green Lantern by tangling him in my yellow cape and hitting him *hard*, came up rolling and looked around for The Martian Manhunter. That's right J'onn, go ahead, turn invisible. I reached for some nice little flash and smoke pellets with his name written all over them and then I heard it. That *voice*.

"All right, Dick," said Bruce in that cold soft voice he uses when he's really angry, "that's enough."

And I froze. Right then and there. My knees locked up and I couldn't move.

Pavlov's dogs, I guess. Almost all my life I've been listening to that voice and doing just as it said, instantly, without thought or hesitation. There I was, a grown man, a hero and leader in my own right who had just aced two of the most powerful members of the JLA all by myself without blinking an eyelash, and I suddenly felt *exactly* like a little boy with his hand caught in the cookie jar. Again.

Bruce has that effect on almost everybody, so I guess I shouldn't be so pissed about it. The Batman has made his own myth and he's very comfortable with the fit. It's just everybody else who has trouble with it. But after all this time of listening to jokes about "Robin, the Boy Blunder" and hearing all the speculation about us, things start to wear, you know? Even Jim Gordon once asked me about it. Poor stumbling old walrus whuffed into his mustache and turned beet red.

"How are ... *things* between you and your mentor?" he asked.

We were alone in his office, waiting for Bruce to return and I could see the embarrassed concern in his blue eyes. I didn't understand him at first. Hey, I was only 14, ok?

"They're fine, Sir," I replied, puzzled. Gordon shifted uncomfortably in his office chair and persisted as though with an onerous, unpleasant duty he wished with all his might to avoid. Babs says he sucked at the birds and the bees thing, too.

"No ... problems?" he inquired, increasingly mortified. "I mean, nothing that you want to ... talk about?" That's when it hit me what he was getting at. There are times when I wish my costume included a full face mask like Bruce's. Jim Gordon continued to study his shoes very carefully. I gulped.

"Oh," I quipped hastily to cover myself, "you mean other than the fact that he won't let me take the Batmobile on dates? And slumber parties in the Batcave are right out."

"The Joker is planning to assassinate Mayor Hill," said Bruce from the shadows. "You should warn him about that."

I swear Jim Gordon jumped three feet straight out of his chair and turned white as a rain washed bone. I don't *think* Bruce was close enough to see the guilt that flashed across his broad features, but I wouldn't bet on it.

"Lord God, have mercy on an old man's heart!" he cried. "Don't *do* that!"

"Sorry," said the Batman and smiled.

Me, I wondered how long he'd been standing there, listening.

I used to worry about sex. I used to worry about it a lot, in fact. Ask Donna. But then, don't most teenage boys? *Is* Bruce a homosexual? I don't think so. Most of the time The Batman is the next best thing to asexual that I know. He uses dissolute, scatter-brained playboy Bruce Wayne's women the same way he uses his millions ... as cover. If Bruce is gay, he hides it well. There are many things that make The Batman the Dark Knight Avenger that he is and there are times when even that magnificent body can't contain the size and force of the mind and spirit that drives it. But I don't think that being gay is one of Bruce's problems.

Ok, I'm going to let you in on a little secret. Remember a couple of years ago there was all that publicity about Wonder Woman's love life? It was all over the tabloids. WONDER WOMAN TAKES SECRET LOVER! There was even a "60 Minutes" special about it. Barbara Walters was

livid when they stole the interview from her. It died down, of course as these things do. But no one ever did figure out who Diana's lover was, not even her JLA colleagues. Now most people just assumed that it was Clark. A natural thought, I guess; he's the ultimate man, she's the ultimate woman, etc. Lois almost had a cow. She put poor Clark through hell and it really wasn't funny. After all, he was innocent of all charges. No, Clark wasn't Diana's lover.

It was Bruce.

How do I know? Look, I'm not the *second* best living detective for nothing, ok? Bruce is the best there is at what he does and I'm a quick study. The only thing that really surprised me was Diana. What was surprising you ask? I hope I don't need to draw you an Esso road map. Diana *does* come from an Island where there aren't any men, doesn't she? And she's a big girl now. Bruce? Well, Bruce has always gotten involved with women he can't have. Selina and Ivy and Talia are no accidents. Bruce can't seem to stop punishing himself for surviving when his parents didn't. I didn't say anything, of course. Bruce and I never talked about it. But then, we've never talked about a lot of things so I guess there's nothing new there.

The thing I really remember the most about that whole business is that I'm pretty sure they called it off just before the annual advent of Hell Week. Now if that isn't rotten timing I don't know what is. Damn, I guess I should explain. Hell Week ... That's my private name for the week leading up to January 15. See, every January 15 Bruce just ... disappears. No warning, no explanation, no nothing. He's just not there and no one can find him. If the Second Coming falls on January 15, Bruce won't be there. And for about a week before that day Alfred and I used to just batten down the hatches by unspoken agreement. Bruce's temper would fray, he'd be even more silent and unapproachable than ever and he prowled Gotham every night like a restless demon. And Lord help the hapless crook who chooses Hell Week for his big heist. Bruce has a bad habit of leaving preps bloody and battered anyway. During Hell Week I've seen him beat them half dead. My first Hell Week with Bruce I was scared spitless. There have been plenty of times that I've been afraid *for* Bruce. That first Hell Week was the only time I've ever been afraid *of* him. I was sure he'd lost his mind. But he disappeared on an January 15 and on January 16 he was back as if nothing had ever happened. After that things calmed down quite a lot. The next year I took my cue from Alfred. He took special care of "Master Bruce" during Hell Week, asked no questions and when the rage had passed he welcomed him back. I was 16 before it occurred to me to wonder *where* Bruce went every January 15 like clock work.

So I followed him.

All right, I'm an idiot. I was a cocky 16 year old, what do you expect? Following him was easy. It was keeping him from seeing me that was the tricky part. Christ, if you don't think *that* was hard! I'd never had made it but he was ... distracted.

It was pretty confusing all the way around, if you want to know the truth. The first florist shop he broke into near Gotham International was a surprise. But he was in and out of there so quickly it almost made my head spin. He made a thorough search of the place, though. Didn't even disturb the dust on the floor, but before he left I'll bet he could have given you chapter and verse on every flower in the

place; how many, what kind, location, whose nursery they came from and how recently. He was looking for something. But he didn't find it there. He left empty handed. By the time he ransacked the fifth florist shop over on the East End he was getting a lot more careless. In the last one down by the docks he smashed some refrigerated glass cases in a black fury, ripped apart some standing displays and then had to leave money to pay for the damage. Over all he searched more than a dozen florist shops all over Gotham before he was done. I was starting to get a bad feeling about this. I almost wished that I had stayed home. Something was **very** wrong. You have no idea how glad I was to see him emerge at last from The Rain Florist carrying a single red rose. He tucked it carefully into a fold of his cape and took off, heading east.

But it wasn't until he came to rest in an alley about a block away from the old Rialto Theater that I suddenly knew in my bones where he was going and why he was there. I started to sweat despite the cold.

These days they call the place Crime Alley and it's one of the very worst sections of Gotham. But twenty-two years ago it was called Park View and it was one of the nicest places in town, bright and lively with shops and happy people.

And then something bad happened there and the area went down hill fast.

Two really nice people were murdered there and left behind a confused and grieving young son. Two nice people named Wayne. Thomas and Martha Wayne. Their son's name is Bruce and he has never stopped grieving. I was looking at the place where The Batman was born. Bruce had come home.

Slowly, he sank to his knees and lay the rose in a certain place. Then he pushed back his cowl. I swear he was almost smiling.

"I'm sorry, mother. I couldn't find white roses. I know they're your favorites, but I couldn't find any this year. I'm sorry."

I'd never heard his voice quite like this before. There was a lightness to it; almost a shy quality as if he been away from someone he loved for far too long and had eagerly returned to their embrace. My eyes widened. I think that was when I realized that I was listening to Bruce Wayne and not The Batman. I began to remember that voice, now. I hadn't heard it in a very long time, it occurred to me. Mostly I remember it from my childhood when a grieving and frightened little boy named Dick Grayson first came to the immense sometimes lonely halls of Wayne Manor. Yeah, I heard it a lot then. With mounting fear I wondered when I had stopped hearing it. And why.

Silently, I stepped to his side and stood there for a moment. I lay my hand on his head and stroked his hair. It seemed to comfort him.

"For her, they'll always be roses, Bruce," I murmured.

He didn't move at all for a long time and I just stood there. I couldn't leave him to be consumed by his inner demons. I still can't. After a moment he stood and he was The Batman again. But from then on

I knew that there **was** a Bruce Wayne. He's in there somewhere tucked away safely where no one can hurt him ever again. And I love him. I'd die for him. Suddenly I heard Alfred's cultured voice from long ago.

"Master Dick is necessary."

Yes, he is.

Bruce looked at me and those intense blue eyes were calm and peaceful.

"Let's go home, son," he said.

The End

End
file.